The Spring of Goliath

How One Death at Diaoyu Castle Saved Two Civilizations

A Counterfactual History

Third in a series on human agency in history

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"Mongols are killed by Mongol swords.
If we were united, then we would have conquered all of the world."
— Berke Khan, c. 1262

I. The Orders

In 1251, a kuriltai in the Mongol heartland elevated Möngke Khan to the throne of the largest contiguous empire in human history. He was the fourth Great Khan, grandson of Genghis, and the last ruler under whom the empire would function as a unified political entity. Möngke was methodical, austere, and ruthlessly competent. He conducted a census of territories stretching from Korea to the Danube. He reformed taxation, standardized currency, and punished generals who plundered civilians without authorization. And then he divided the world between his brothers.

Kublai would go south, into the vastness of Song China. Hulagu would go west, into the Islamic heartland. Möngke himself would coordinate from the center, personally joining the Chinese campaign when the time came. The division was pragmatic and breathtaking in its ambition. Möngke was not merely sending raiding parties. He was commissioning the final conquests—the campaigns that would bring the remaining civilizations of the known world under Mongol sovereignty.

Hulagu's orders were specific and sequential. He was to subjugate the Lurs of southern Iran; destroy the Nizari Ismaili sect—the Assassins—in their mountain fortresses; compel the submission or achieve the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad; do the same to the Ayyubid states in Damascus; and finally, submit or destroy the Bahri Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt. The mandate covered nearly the entire Muslim world west of Afghanistan. Möngke's instructions were clear: treat those who submit with kindness, and utterly destroy those who do not.

To accomplish this, Möngke assembled the largest military force in Mongol history. By imperial decree, two in every ten fighting men across the entire empire were conscripted for Hulagu's army. The result was a force of perhaps 150,000 Mongol warriors, supplemented by 20,000 Christian troops from the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and the Frankish Principality of Antioch, a thousand squads of Chinese siege engineers, and auxiliary contingents of Persian and Turkic soldiers. Nothing like it had been seen before, and nothing like it would be seen again. Hulagu departed Mongolia in 1253. His army moved so slowly—a deliberate migration of men, horses, families, and siege

equipment across thousands of miles—that he did not cross the Oxus into Persia until early 1256.

What followed was a campaign of annihilation so systematic that it reshaped the political geography of the medieval world.

II. The Annihilation

The Assassins fell first. For two centuries, the Nizari Ismailis had operated from mountain fortresses so impregnable that no army had ever taken them. Their network of political murder had terrorized Sunni caliphs, Seljuk viziers, and Crusader lords alike. Alamut—the Eagle's Nest—was considered unconquerable. Hulagu's reputation conquered it without a fight. In November 1256, the Assassin Grand Master Rukn al-Din Khurshah surrendered and ordered his remaining castles to open their gates. He was sent to Möngke in Mongolia, who had him executed on the road. The sect that had defied empires for two hundred years was extinguished in weeks.

Then came Baghdad.

The Abbasid Caliphate had ruled from Baghdad for five hundred years. The city was, alongside Kaifeng and Hangzhou, one of perhaps three cities on earth with a population exceeding one million. It was the seat of the Caliph—the spiritual successor to the Prophet Muhammad and the symbolic head of Sunni Islam. It housed the House of Wisdom, thirty-six public libraries, astronomical observatories, and hospitals. The scholars of Baghdad had preserved and transmitted the knowledge of Greek antiquity, advanced mathematics, optics, and medicine. When Hulagu demanded submission, the Caliph Al-Musta'sim refused, reportedly warning that an attack on Baghdad would mobilize the entire Muslim world from India to North Africa.

It did not.

Hulagu divided his army into three converging columns and closed on Baghdad from all directions in January 1258. The Caliph's army of 30,000 sallied out to meet one column, won a brief engagement, and celebrated on the banks of the Tigris. That night, Mongol engineers broke the river dikes and flooded the encampment. The Abbasid force was

drowned or slaughtered. Chinese siege engines breached Baghdad's walls within days. On February 10, the Caliph surrendered. Three days later, the Mongols entered the city.

What followed was one of the bloodiest episodes in recorded history. For a week, Hulagu's soldiers moved systematically through Baghdad, killing men, women, and children. Hulagu himself later estimated the dead at roughly 200,000; other accounts range far higher. Mosques, palaces, libraries, and hospitals were burned. The waters of the Tigris were said to have run black with the ink of destroyed manuscripts and red with the blood of scholars. The House of Wisdom was obliterated. Only Baghdad's Nestorian Christians were spared, at the intercession of Hulagu's wife Doquz Khatun, herself a Christian. The Caliph was forced to watch the destruction of his city and the murder of his family, and then was executed—rolled in a carpet and trampled by horses, because Mongol tradition forbade the spilling of royal blood upon the earth.

Five hundred years of the Abbasid Caliphate ended in a single week. The institution of the caliphate—the central religious authority of Sunni Islam—was extinguished. Modern historians debate whether the sack of Baghdad truly ended the Islamic Golden Age or merely punctuated its long decline, but the symbolism was absolute. The political and spiritual center of the Islamic world had been annihilated by a non-Muslim army, and no Islamic power had lifted a finger to prevent it.

Hulagu did not pause. His army swept into Syria, took Aleppo after a short siege, and on March 1, 1260, entered Damascus without a fight. The last Ayyubid king, An-Nasir Yusuf, was captured and later executed. Christian Mass was celebrated in the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus—a scene of triumph for Hulagu's Armenian and Frankish Christian allies that would have been unthinkable a year earlier. Mongol patrols pushed south through Palestine, reaching as far as Gaza. Advance garrisons were stationed in Nablus and Gaza. Every target on Möngke's list had been achieved except the last.

Egypt.

III. The Letter

Hulagu sent his demand to Cairo with the confidence of a man who had never been refused without consequence. The letter, addressed to the Mamluk Sultan Qutuz, was a masterpiece of Mongol psychological warfare:

From the King of Kings of the East and West, the Great Khan. To Qutuz the Mamluk, who fled to escape our swords. You should think of what happened to other countries and submit to us. You have heard how we have conquered a vast empire and have purified the earth of the disorders that tainted it. We have conquered vast areas, massacring all the people. You cannot escape from the terror of our armies. Where can you flee? What road will you use to escape us? Our horses are swift, our arrows sharp, our swords like thunderbolts, our hearts as hard as the mountains, our soldiers as numerous as the sand. Fortresses will not detain us, nor armies stop us. Your prayers to God will not avail against us. We are not moved by tears nor touched by lamentations.

The letter was not empty bluster. Everything in it was true. No army had stopped the Mongols. No fortress had held. No prayer had availed. Hulagu's force outnumbered the entire Mamluk military establishment by at least five to one. The Mamluks had watched the Assassins, the Caliph, and the Ayyubids fall in succession and understood exactly what was coming.

Qutuz's response was to behead the Mongol envoys and display their heads on the Bab Zuweila, one of the great gates of Cairo.

It was an act of extraordinary defiance—or extraordinary recklessness. In the Mongol diplomatic code, the murder of envoys was the one unforgivable provocation. It guaranteed total war. But Qutuz understood something that the letter's terrifying rhetoric obscured: he could not surrender and survive. The Mamluks were a military caste of enslaved Kipchak Turks who had seized power from their Ayyubid masters only a decade earlier. Their legitimacy rested entirely on their capacity for war. A Mamluk sultan who surrendered to the Mongols would not remain sultan for long. Qutuz chose to fight because the alternative was not survival but a slower death.

But Qutuz also understood something else, something that transformed his defiance from suicide into strategy. He had intelligence from his spies, and the intelligence was extraordinary.

Hulagu was gone.

IV. The Death at Diaoyu Castle

Seven thousand miles to the east, in the mountains of Sichuan province, Möngke Khan had joined the war against the Southern Song dynasty in person. It was characteristic of Möngke's temperament—he was not a ruler who delegated the hardest fighting. By early 1259, his army had reached the Chongqing region, where a Song fortress perched on a ridge above the town of Hechuan blocked his advance. The fortress was called Diaoyu—Fishing Town. It was small, well-supplied, and built on terrain that neutralized Mongol cavalry superiority.

Möngke's advisors urged him to bypass it or withdraw northward for the summer. The subtropical climate was murderous for steppe warriors accustomed to the high grasslands. Disease ravaged the Mongol camp. Möngke refused to retreat. He had seen too many campaigns stall when commanders lost their nerve. On August 11, 1259, the Great Khan died. The cause is uncertain—cholera, dysentery, a wound sustained during the siege, or the cumulative effect of the climate. His son Asutai carried his body back to Mongolia for burial.

The consequences were instantaneous and global. Mongol imperial tradition required that all princes of the blood participate in the selection of a new Great Khan at a kuriltai, the great council. Campaigns in progress were expected to halt. Möngke had named no successor, and the two strongest candidates—his brothers Kublai and Ariq Böke—immediately began maneuvering for the throne. This was not a ceremonial matter. The kuriltai was where the empire's future was decided, and any prince who failed to participate risked being excluded from the new order.

Hulagu, poised on the border of Egypt with the largest Mongol army ever assembled, received the news and faced an impossible choice. He was himself a potential contender,

or at minimum a kingmaker whose support would determine which brother prevailed. He could not remain in Syria while the succession was decided without him. But if he withdrew his army, the campaign that had taken seven years to prepare and execute would be suspended at the moment of its culmination.

He withdrew.

Hulagu took the bulk of his forces—perhaps 90,000 men or more—back to Azerbaijan, ostensibly because the arid Levant could not sustain so many horses and riders through the summer, but in reality because imperial politics demanded his presence closer to the Mongol heartland. In Syria, he left behind a single tumen under his best general, the Nestorian Christian Kitbuqa. A tumen was nominally 10,000 men but often fielded fewer. Some estimates place Kitbuqa's actual strength at perhaps 10,000 to 20,000, including Armenian and Georgian vassal troops.

Hulagu appears to have considered this force sufficient. The Assassins, the Caliphate, and the Ayyubids had all crumbled before smaller Mongol detachments. There was no reason to believe the Mamluks would be different. No reason, that is, except for one critical fact that Hulagu either did not know or did not credit: the Mamluks were not like the other armies he had destroyed.

V. The People of the Steppe

The Mamluks were, in a precise and paradoxical sense, the Mongols' own creation. The word *mamluk* means "owned"—a slave. The Mamluk military caste was composed of boys purchased from the Kipchak Turkish and Cuman tribes of the Central Asian steppe, converted to Islam, and trained from childhood in the arts of mounted warfare. They were the finest cavalry in the Islamic world precisely because they came from the same steppe culture that had produced the Mongols themselves. They rode the same horses, drew the same composite bows, practiced the same mounted archery, and understood the same tactical vocabulary of feigned retreats, encirclements, and hammer-and-anvil maneuvers that had made Mongol armies invincible against sedentary civilizations.

Many of the Mamluks serving under Qutuz in 1260 were themselves refugees from the Mongol conquests. Qutuz himself was born into the Khwarazmian dynasty, which Genghis Khan had destroyed a generation earlier. He had been enslaved as a child and sold through the slave markets of the Middle East before rising through the Mamluk military hierarchy to seize the sultanate. Baybars, his most talented general, had fled Syria after the Mongol capture of Damascus. These were men who had lost everything to the Mongols and understood, with the intimate knowledge of survivors, exactly how Mongol armies fought.

The Arab historian Abu Shama would later observe that at Ain Jalut, "the people of the steppe had been destroyed by the people of the steppe." It was not a metaphor. The Mamluks did not defeat the Mongols by developing some revolutionary counter-tactic or superior technology. They defeated them by being the one army in the western world that could fight the Mongols on equal terms, horseman against horseman, archer against archer, feigned retreat against feigned retreat.

But equal terms were only possible because Hulagu had left. Against Kitbuqa's 10,000 to 20,000, the Mamluks could field roughly 20,000 well-trained cavalry. Against Hulagu's full force of over 100,000, the Mamluks would have been outnumbered at least five to one. Equal skill at five-to-one odds is not a battle. It is an execution.

VI. Ain Jalut

When Qutuz learned that Hulagu had departed with the bulk of his army, he acted with the decisiveness of a man who understood he might never get another chance. He assembled his forces in Cairo, marched north into Palestine, and sought battle. In an extraordinary diplomatic episode, the Crusader lords of Acre—the remnant of the Kingdom of Jerusalem—chose neutrality. Pope Alexander IV had forbidden any alliance with the Mongols, but the Crusaders went further: they allowed the Mamluk army to pass through their territory unmolested and even permitted Qutuz to camp and resupply near Acre. The traditional enemies of Islam had concluded that the Mongols were the greater threat.

On September 3, 1260, the two armies met at Ain Jalut—the Spring of Goliath—in the Jezreel Valley of southeastern Galilee. The site was reputedly where the young David had killed the Philistine giant. The symbolism was apt, though the roles were inverted: it was the outnumbered Mongols who stood against the larger force.

Baybars commanded the Mamluk vanguard and executed the battle plan with lethal precision. He advanced with a small force, engaged the Mongol line, and then performed a feigned retreat—the signature Mongol tactic, now turned against its inventors. Kitbuqa, a veteran general who should have recognized the maneuver, took the bait. He ordered a full advance, and his army poured forward into the valley. The main Mamluk force, concealed in the wooded highlands, struck from three sides.

The fighting lasted from dawn to midday. The Mongols, though trapped and outnumbered, fought with characteristic ferocity and at one point broke the Mamluk left wing. Qutuz threw down his helmet, rode into the melee, and rallied his troops with appeals to Islamic faith. The battle turned. The Mongol force was driven toward Bisan, regrouped, counterattacked, and was broken again. Kitbuqa refused to flee. “Death is inevitable,” he reportedly said. “It is better to die with a good name than to flee.” He was captured and beheaded on the field.

The Mamluk victory was total. Nearly the entire Mongol force that had remained in the Levant was destroyed. It was the first time a Mongol army had been annihilated in open battle and the territory lost was never recovered. In the sixty years of subsequent warfare between the Ilkhanate and the Mamluk Sultanate, the Mongols would win only one engagement and briefly reoccupy Syria in 1300 before being expelled again. The frontier settled permanently at the Tigris. The Mongol advance into the Islamic heartland—the campaign that Möngke had designed to bring the entire Muslim world under Mongol sovereignty—stopped at a spring in Galilee.

VII. The Cascade

Möngke’s death did not merely halt one campaign. It shattered the Mongol Empire as a unified political system.

When Hulagu returned to Persia in 1262 and prepared to avenge Ain Jalut with his full army, he found that the world had changed. His cousin Berke Khan, ruler of the Golden Horde and a convert to Islam, was enraged by the destruction of Baghdad and the murder of the Caliph. Berke had reportedly declared: “He has sacked all the cities of the Muslims and has brought about the death of the Caliph. With the help of God, I will call him to account for so much innocent blood.” Berke forged an alliance with the Mamluks—the first time one Mongol khanate had allied with a foreign power against another branch of the family—and launched a series of attacks into Hulagu’s northern territories.

The Berke-Hulagu War of the 1260s was the first open military conflict between Mongol princes. It was not a border skirmish. Hulagu attempted an invasion north of the Caucasus in 1263 and suffered a severe defeat. His army was driven back across the Terek River; many of his soldiers drowned when the ice broke beneath their horses. The war consumed Hulagu’s remaining years and military resources. He never assembled another army for Egypt. He died on February 8, 1265, his great campaign unfinished, his vengeance unachieved.

Simultaneously, the Toluid Civil War between Kublai and Ariq Böke raged from 1260 to 1264. Kublai ultimately prevailed and established the Yuan Dynasty in China, but the conflict permanently fractured the empire into four rival khanates—the Yuan, the Golden Horde, the Chagatai Khanate, and the Ilkhanate—which would never again operate under unified command. The Mongol Empire, which had functioned as a single strategic entity capable of coordinating campaigns across the breadth of Eurasia, ceased to exist. In its place were four successor states that spent as much energy fighting each other as they did fighting their external enemies.

All of this flowed from a single death at a minor fortress in Sichuan.

VIII. The Counterfactual

The question is not whether Hulagu would have attacked Egypt. Egypt was explicitly listed in his orders. The question is what would have happened if Möngke had not

died—if the Great Khan had survived the siege of Diaoyu Castle and continued to coordinate the empire from its center.

In that world, Hulagu does not withdraw. He remains in Syria with his full army of over 100,000 veterans, fresh from the destruction of every power that stood against them from the Oxus to the Mediterranean. His demand to Qutuz arrives backed not by a token garrison but by the most formidable military force on earth. Qutuz's options narrow to zero. He commands perhaps 20,000 Mamluks—superb soldiers, but outnumbered five to one by an army that has already demonstrated its ability to destroy fortified cities with populations of a million. Even the Mamluks' steppe tactics, their one qualitative advantage, cannot compensate for that disparity.

The Mamluks might still fight. Qutuz and Baybars were not men who calculated odds carefully. But the historical Ain Jalut succeeded because of a specific ratio: roughly equal forces, with the Mamluks enjoying slight numerical superiority, local knowledge, and the element of surprise. Remove any of those advantages—multiply the Mongol force by five, add Chinese siege engineers capable of breaching any fortification, add the momentum of an army that has not lost in seven years—and the battle becomes a catastrophe for the Mamluks.

Cairo falls. This is not speculation; it is extrapolation from observed Mongol capabilities. Baghdad, a larger and better-fortified city, fell in twelve days. Damascus surrendered without a fight. Cairo's defenses were formidable but not supernatural, and the Mongol siege apparatus—Chinese engineers, mangonels, incendiary weapons—had cracked every fortress it encountered. The destruction of Cairo would have been the destruction of the last independent center of Islamic political and military power in the Middle East.

From Cairo, the Hejaz lies open. Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam, had no significant military defenses and depended entirely on the political protection of whoever controlled Egypt. Under Mongol occupation, the holiest sites in Islam would have passed into the hands of a ruling dynasty that was Buddhist and Christian in its sympathies. Hulagu's mother Sorghaghtani Beki was a Nestorian Christian. His favorite wife Doquz Khatun was a Nestorian Christian. His general Kitbuqa was a Nestorian Christian. The Baghdad massacre spared only Christians. The Damascus triumph

included Christian Mass in the Umayyad Mosque. The Mongol conquest of Arabia would not have been a conquest by a religiously neutral power but by one with active Christian sympathies operating at the symbolic heart of Islam.

The implications for Islamic civilization are almost beyond calculation. The Abbasid Caliphate had already been destroyed. The Mamluk re-establishment of a puppet caliphate in Cairo—which historically preserved the institution until its absorption by the Ottomans in 1517—would never have occurred. The chain of caliphal authority that connected the companions of the Prophet to the Ottoman sultans to the modern concept of Islamic institutional continuity would have been severed permanently in 1258. No successor state would have existed to pick up the thread.

And then there is Europe.

IX. The Atlantic Horizon

The Mongol threat to Europe was not theoretical. In 1241, Mongol armies under Batu Khan and the great general Subutai had invaded Poland and Hungary simultaneously, annihilating European armies at Legnica and Mohi in the space of two days. They had withdrawn only because of the death of the Great Khan Ögedei—the same mechanism that would save Egypt nineteen years later. Batu had spent the rest of his life preparing to resume the invasion of Europe and was on the verge of launching it when he died in 1255. His brother Berke, who succeeded him, redirected the Golden Horde's energies southward against Hulagu. But this rivalry was itself a consequence of Möngke's death and the fragmentation it caused.

In a world where Möngke lives and the empire remains unified, the strategic picture is radically different. There is no Berke-Hulagu war, because there is no succession crisis to generate it. The Golden Horde remains a cooperative element of a unified empire rather than a rival power. Hulagu, having conquered Egypt and Arabia, commands the resources and manpower of the entire Middle East in addition to his original army. The Ilkhanate's historical weakness—chronic labor shortages and economic devastation from the initial conquests—is offset by the wealth of Egypt, the trade revenues of the Red Sea, and access to North African manpower.

No surviving document records a specific Mongol plan for Hulagu to invade Europe through the Middle East. But the Mongol Empire's strategic logic was cumulative: each conquest funded and enabled the next. The historical Hulagu sought a Franco-Mongol alliance against the Mamluks, sending embassies to European courts in 1262. In the counterfactual—having already defeated the Mamluks—his correspondence with Europe would not be diplomatic overtures but the same demand letters he sent to Baghdad and Cairo: submit or be destroyed. The Pope who had forbidden the Crusaders from allying with the Mongols would have received his own version of the letter to Qutuz.

Whether Hulagu's armies could actually have conquered Western Europe is debatable. The European landscape—forests, castles, boggy terrain—was less favorable to Mongol cavalry than the open steppes and river plains of the Middle East. European heavy cavalry, though decisively defeated at Legnica and Mohi, might have performed better in defensive actions around fortified positions. The logistical challenges of sustaining a steppe army in Western Europe were real.

But consider the balance of forces. The Europe of 1260 was not a unified power. It was a patchwork of feudal states engaged in endemic warfare against each other, the Papacy excommunicating emperors, the Holy Roman Empire fragmenting, the Crusader states dying. The combined military resources of Latin Christendom were substantial but had never been—and would never be—deployed in a coordinated fashion. The Mongols, by contrast, had demonstrated an unparalleled capacity for multi-front, multi-year campaigns coordinated across continental distances. They had already defeated European armies on European soil. They had siege engineers who could breach any wall in the world. And in this counterfactual, they would be approaching not only from the east through Russia but from the south through a conquered Middle East, with the economic resources of Persia, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt at their disposal.

Even if outright conquest proved impossible, the sustained pressure of a unified Mongol Empire on Europe's eastern and southern frontiers would have fundamentally altered the trajectory of European civilization. The resources devoted to the Crusades, to intra-European warfare, to the commercial expansion that laid the groundwork for the Renaissance—all of these would have been redirected to defense against an existential

threat. The fragile, competitive, commercially dynamic civilization that would eventually produce the Scientific Revolution and the Columbian exchange would have been besieged and impoverished at precisely the moment when, historically, it was beginning to flourish.

X. The Argument from Agency

This paper is the third in a series examining moments when the actions of individual human beings—or, in this case, the biological fate of a single human body—deflected history from what appeared to be its determined course. The first paper examined how Nestor Makhno's anarchist insurgency in Ukraine revealed that Bolshevik centralization was a choice, not a necessity—that the Russian Revolution could have produced a radically different political order. The second examined how a cancerous nodule in Frederick III's throat enabled the accession of Wilhelm II, whose specific decisions converted Germany's structural rise into the catastrophe of the twentieth century. In each case, the argument is the same: structural conditions create possibilities, but individuals determine which possibilities are realized.

The case of Möngke Khan is the most extreme version of this argument, because the individual in question did not make a decision at all. He died. The agency belongs not to him but to a pathogen—to cholera, or dysentery, or whatever killed him in the subtropical heat of Sichuan. The structuralist position, which holds that large historical outcomes are determined by deep forces rather than individual actions, is here tested against the starkest possible counter-example: a microscopic organism in a Great Khan's intestines altered the fate of civilizations across three continents.

The structuralist might argue that even without Möngke's death, the Mongol Empire would eventually have fragmented. The distances were too great, the cultural differences too vast, the centrifugal forces too powerful. This is probably true in the long run. But the long run is not history—history is the medium run, the span of decades and centuries in which actual human beings live and die, and in which the specific sequence and timing of events determines everything. The Mongol Empire did eventually fragment. But whether it fragmented in 1259 or 1290 or 1320 determined whether the

Mamluks survived or were annihilated, whether the caliphate persisted in some form or vanished entirely, whether Islamic civilization retained an independent political base or was absorbed into a Mongol-Buddhist-Christian imperium, and whether Europe faced an existential military threat from the south at the very moment it was beginning to develop the commercial and intellectual infrastructure of modernity.

Consider the chain. Möngke dies at Diaoyu Castle. Hulagu withdraws from Syria. Kitbuqa is left with 10,000 men. The Mamluks destroy them at Ain Jalut. The succession crisis triggers the Toluid Civil War. Berke attacks Hulagu. The empire fragments into four rival khanates. Hulagu never returns to Egypt. The Mamluks survive, establish a puppet caliphate in Cairo, protect the holy cities, expel the Crusaders, and preserve Islamic civilization as an independent force in world history. Europe is never invaded from the south. The competitive, fragmented, commercially dynamic European state system survives to produce the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the world we inhabit.

Every link in that chain is contingent. Möngke's advisors begged him to leave Sichuan before the summer heat. A warrior named Baritchi of the Erlat tribe called this advice cowardly and urged the Khan to stay. Möngke, who wished to take the nearby fortress, was pleased by Baritchi's words and remained. If the advice of the cautious counselor Togan had prevailed instead—if Möngke had gone north for the summer as was customary—he likely survives. Hulagu stays in Syria. The Mamluks face the full Mongol army. Cairo burns.

The distance between these two worlds—the world where Möngke lives and the world we inhabit—is the distance between one man's preference for a cautious warrior's advice over a bold one's. Structural forces built the Mongol Empire, armed its armies, and aimed them at the remaining civilizations of the medieval world. But whether those armies arrived at their destination, and what they did when they got there, was determined by individual human decisions layered on individual biological contingencies.

Berke Khan saw it clearly. "If we were united," he said, "then we would have conquered all of the world." He was probably right. And the reason they were not united was that a

Great Khan ignored sensible advice about the weather in Sichuan and died of disease at a fortress whose name translates, with the universe's characteristic dark humor, as Fishing Town.

History is not a river flowing inevitably toward a predetermined sea. It is a series of springs—contingent, unpredictable, and small—that happen to converge. At the Spring of Goliath in Galilee, one such convergence preserved the two civilizations that would shape the modern world. The spring exists because a man died. The civilizations exist because the spring held.

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